



**For Immediate Release:** 02.04.02

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Firm Selected to Coordinate Village Response to Ike Plans

The Village Board Monday approved a contract with a law firm to provide legal, technical, and lobbying assistance to ensure the community's interests are protected as the Illinois Department of Transportation develops plans to mitigate congestion on Interstate 290, the Eisenhower Expressway.

O'Conner & Hannan, a full-service law firm that has one of the older lobbying practices in Washington, D.C., was selected from among six firms that responded to a Village request for proposal for professional assistance issued in November. Representatives of three of the firms were interviewed in early January by a team of Village senior managers who recommend O'Conner & Hannan to the board. The firm will team-up with one of Illinois' preeminent lobbying law firms, Sorling, Northrup, Hanna, Cullen and Cochran, to present the Oak Park position in Springfield.

"This contract with O'Conner & Hannan is an important step in what is sure to be a long process to protect the interests of the Village," said Village President Joanne E. Trapani. "Talk of expanding the Eisenhower Expressway has understandably created a sense of concern and uncertainty in the community. But there is no reason to panic. With the help of such an experienced, qualified firm, residents can rest assured that their interests will be effectively represented in the political and administrative arenas where the real decisions on the future of the expressway ultimately will be made."

Village Manager Carl Swenson said of the three firms interviewed, O'Connor & Hannan displayed the most in-depth knowledge and experience in leveraging federal environmental and transportation law and Federal Highway Administration regulations to a community's advantage. He said the firm also presented a plan to immediately put officials in Springfield and Washington, D.C., on notice of the Village's concerns about the project and its intent to act aggressively to protect the community's interests.

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Added Trapani, “One thing we will not accept is any sort of cavalier treatment. We want, and will demand, serious consideration of our concerns about lane additions, and a satisfactory solution to existing highway problems and any other problems we identify in IDOT’s plans and planning process.”

Swenson said with O’Connor & Hannan guiding Village efforts the complexities of the processes associated with a major highway project may actually work to the Village’s advantage. He said the firm would immediately investigate IDOT’s compliance with pertinent federal laws and regulations established to protect communities from negative impacts of federal transportation projects. In addition, political, grassroots and legal pressures will be brought to bear on IDOT now even before its draft plan is made available for public comment.

“The process really has only just begun,” Swenson said. “By acting now before any formal draft plans are presented by IDOT as part of its preliminary environmental and engineering study, the Village is in the most effective position to influence IDOT’s plans and ensure that our concerns are addressed.”

Among the Village’s specific concerns are how an Eisenhower expansion project could impact private and publicly owned land, noise and air pollution, natural resources such as parks and recreation areas, and community cohesion and character. As currently conceived according to an IDOT feasibility study completed several years ago, the project would reconfigure the roadway largely within the current right-of-way to create a “high-occupancy vehicle” (HOV) lane in each direction. IDOT also has indicated it would like to move the Austin Boulevard and Harlem Avenue exits from their current center lane location to the right, outside lane.

The Village also will urge state transportation planners to revisit a 1987 IDOT report commissioned by the General Assembly that would have reconnected entire sections of the Village over the Expressway with park land or parking lots, along with redesigned and enhanced CTA transit stations, Swenson said.

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Urging residents not to accept rumors and innuendo as fact, Trapani said, “Cool heads and experienced hands are what are needed most now. We have hired an incredibly well qualified and experienced legal, technical and lobbying team to help us represent our interests through methods that are proven effective in the Washington D.C, Springfield and regional circles where decisions will be made.”

With access to the strategic skills of O’Connor & Hannan, Trapani said the Village would be an effective advocate for the needs of the community. She said staff will keep residents informed of developments, and alert them to opportune times to contact the appropriate state and federal officials. In addition, now that a firm has been hired to coordinate the Village’s approach, Trapani said a citizens commission would be appointed to involve residents in advising the Village and disseminating information to the community.

Trapani called upon Oak Park residents to remain interested and active in asserting the Village’s concerns about the project with key transportation policy decision makers.

“Even if you are not on the committee, everyone can be involved in the process. We certainly want citizens to offer opinions, but we especially need residents to contact the key decision making officials at the regional, state and federal levels to help us make sure that Oak Park’s interests are fully considered.“

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